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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the Williamsport, Pennsylvania, Area School District's foreign language exploration (FLEX) program's effectiveness regarding the students' decisions when electing a sequential program of language courses. The FLEX program in French, German, and Spanish was implemented in three middle schools in the years 1981-85 and was assessed by dual questionnaires, administered in September and in May, and by language enrollment records. Analysis of these data for three school years revealed six student groups: (1) students loyal to their language choices during the school year, (2) students changing languages during the year, (3) students who elected to study a language in September but only decided on a particular language in May, (4) students who decided to study a language in September but decided not to by May, (5) students who elected not to study a language in September but decided to study one by May, and (6) students who remained loyal to their decision not to study a language. Further analysis revealed that the FLEX course experience did influence students in groups 2, 3, 4, and 5 in as many as three out of four cases and that it did not influence students who had chosen not to study a language. In addition, retention rates at some levels in all three languages have improved since the implementation of the FLEX course. Course implementation in earlier grades and rotation of langauge teacher assignment to the FLEX courses are recommended. (MSE)

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A REPORT ON THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE EXPLORATORY PROGRAM'S EFFECTIVENESS REGARDING:

1) CHOICE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY,
AND
2) RETENTION RATES IN UPPER LEVEL COURSES

WILLIAMSPORT AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT
1981-1985

by

John E. Carlson

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The teachers and students of the FLEX program in the
Williamsport Area School District

and is dedicated to
my family, friends and dog, who
have endured my neglect and vile dispositions.

The United States can be characterized as the home of the brave, and the land of the monolingual.

-- Rose Lee Hayden
(Simon, 1980, p. 1)

During the 1981-82 school year the Williamsport Area School District, Williamsport, Pa., introduced an exploratory foreign language program into its curricular offerings. The course was part of a reorganization within the entire district, that involved the realignment of schools, staff and curriculum. This paper analyzes and reports the effectiveness of FLEX (Foreign Language Exploration) in the three middle schools from 1981-85.

The Superintendent, Dr. Oscar Knade, stated in his report concerning the goals of the middle school that it seeks to "...provide an experience-oriented program that will help pupils gradually assume full decision-making reponsibilities" (1980, p. 9). To reflect this philosophy, it was proposed that a foreign language exploratory program be incorporated in the middle school curriculum. In 1980 the school board adopted the following recommendation:

> Grade Eight -- FLEX will be offered. This represents the major academic change from what is presently offered in the eighth grade.
> In this program, students will be exposed to the study of French, German, Latin, and Spanish. The exploration of these four languages will help students determine in which of the four languages to begin formal study in the ninth grade.
> Teachers certified in French, German, or Spanish will serve each of the middle schools for a twelve week period of time. (pp. 2,4)

In September, 1981, this new FLEX course replaced an eighth grade language course previously offered in the junior high schools. In that course students were introduced to either French, German or Spanish, whichever one they had selected as seventh graders. Following successful completion of the introductory course, the study of Level I language began in the ninth grade. Currently students also commence Level I studies as ninth graders, but their choices concerning which

language to pursue, if any, now follow exposure to all of the foreign languages. All eighth grade students are enrolled in this FLEX program five class periods per week, except for those students reading two or more levels below grade level, for whom remedial reading is required.

Since 1981 The French, German and Spanish teachers have rotated among the district's three middle schools every twelve weeks. All teachers emphasize: a) a conversational approach to language acquisition geared to everyday life situations, b) study skills necessary for learning foreign languages as well as one's own language, c) the people, culture and geography of foreign countries, d) the commonalities of modern languages with the classical language, Latin, and e) career opportunities for students with foreign language ability.

This paper analyzes the Williamsport FLEX program's effectiveness regarding the students' decisions when electing a sequential program of language courses. It concentrates on the three modern languages of French, German and Spanish, since Latin instruction was limited in scope and presented by non-certified teachers. It also reports on the number of students enrolled in each level of foreign language study prior to and following the inclusion of FLEX in the school district's curriculum. The following two problems are addressed:

1. Does the FLEX program in the middle schools of the Williamsport Area School District affect the students' choices of future foreign language study at the high school level?

2. Has greater retention occurred in the upper levels of foreign language study since the inception of FLEX into the district's curriculum?

Within the United States FLEX represents another attempt to revitalize the study of foreign languages. It is hoped that FLEX will aid in the selection of each student's foreign language, so that the student will be happier, more successful and continue in studying that particular language longer in order to develop proficiency and fluency. It is one response to the 1980 Presidential Commission's call "for the development of new foreign language programs or expansion of existing programs" (Vaught, 1980, p. 104). In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education in their report A Nation at Risk concluded that:

> Achieving proficiency in a foreign language ordinarily requires from 4 to 6 years of study...it is desirable that students achieve such proficiency because study of a foreign language introduces students to non-English-speaking cultures, heightens awareness and comprehension of one's native tongue, and serves the Nation's needs in commerce, diplomacy, defense, and education. (p. 26)

In response, some states such as Washington and New York have already mandated proficiency in at least one foreign language as part of their graduation requirements.

As early as the 1920's exploratory courses existed at the junior high school level, reappeared in the decade following World War II and have grown in popularity since 1970 (Kennedy and De Lorenzo, 1985). In a 1979 nationwide survey of school districts, more than 23 percent reported offering some type of exploratory program (Eddy, 1980). Given the resurgence of exploratory courses in the public schools and the renewed interest of foreign language educators, Kennedy and De Lorenzo in their book Exploratory Foreign Language Programs (1985) have even advocated the inclusion of a methods course in the college curriculum "designed specifically for prospective and current secondary school teachers of foreign language exploratory courses" (p. 89).

Most FLEX courses in the United States resemble the program established in Prince George's County, Maryland in 1975.

> ...the exploratory course is again on the national scene as one means of introducing young learners to foreign language in a less formal content.
> The Foreign Language Exploratory course is primarily a course to interest youngsters in language study and to inform them about the process of language learning.
> Based on an introduction with specific, limited linguistic and cultural objectives, pupils enrolled in the exploratory course may be able to make a more informed choice in electing a foreign language. (pp. 4,8)

Other objectives of FLEX courses often include: building foreign language readiness and interest, relating other languages to English and vice versa, linguistic awareness, the process of language learning, cultural contrasts and similarities, and career education.

To ascertain the effectiveness of the FLEX program during its initial three years in the Williamsport Area School District, students

enrolled in the course were surveyed each year in September and in May. Questionnaires used in these surveys were constructed and revised with the help of several professional educators, students, laymen and the FLEX course teachers, in order to establish their clarity and validity.

The three language teachers of the FLEX course administered the two questionnaires that appear in Appendixes "A" and "B". The first questionnaire was answered during the initial week of the course, before any language instruction began in the classroom. To insure privacy, students were informed that the teachers would not see their completed forms, and if they wished, they need not supply their names. During the first week of May, students in consultation with their guidance counselors made their final decisions regarding foreign language study at the high school. Immediately following their decisions, the second questionnaire was administered under the same directions as the first one. Of the 1400 students enrolled in FLEX over a three year period, 1309 September forms and 1230 May forms were accurately completed and recorded.

The primary difference between these surveys was the inclusion on the second questionnaire of five additional reasons for choosing or not choosing to study a foreign language. These reasons were:

1. because of learning it in this FLEX course.
2. because of my experiences with it in this FLEX course.
3. because of one of my FLEX course teachers.
4. because of poor grades in this FLEX course.
5. because of my experiences with them in this FLEX course.

These statements were randomly intermingled among the other listed reasons.

From the three groups of eighth grade FLEX students surveyed in September 1981, '82, and '83 and in May 1982, '83, '84, it was possible to pair together 318, 269, and 283 questionnaires of the same individuals in each respective school year. These matched student responses provided additional data enabling the effects of the cou e to be analyzed and interpreted.

In order to report the number of students enrolled in Levels I, II, III and IV of French, German and Spanish, records spanning from the 1978-79 school year to the 1985-86 school year were collected and appear in Appendix "C".

TABLE 1 "YES" Responses Regarding Plans to Study a Foreign Language

	September	May
1981-82	91.0%	66.1%
1982-83	83.6%	72.3%
1983-84	80.2%	63.4%
Composite	85.0%	67.1%

Each year the tallied results from all of the September and May questionnaires indicated a large shift in the proportion of students responding "YES" and "NO" regarding their plans to study a foreign language in ninth grade. The breakdown of percentages for each year is shown in TABLE 1.

The proportion of students choosing each language shifted slightly from September to May each year, but distribution among languages changed dramatically from year to year. In the 1981-82 school year more [redacted] students selected Spanish as compared to French and German combined, a pattern of dominance that had existed for years within the district. The following year, however, French enrolled almost [redacted] the number of students of Spanish and German combined, with Spanish having the fewest students. And finally in the 1983-84 year a more balanced distribution of all three languages was noted as depicted in GRAPH 1.

It is also noteworthy that in September of each year about 40% of the students wanting to study a foreign language were as yet undecided as to which one they desired.

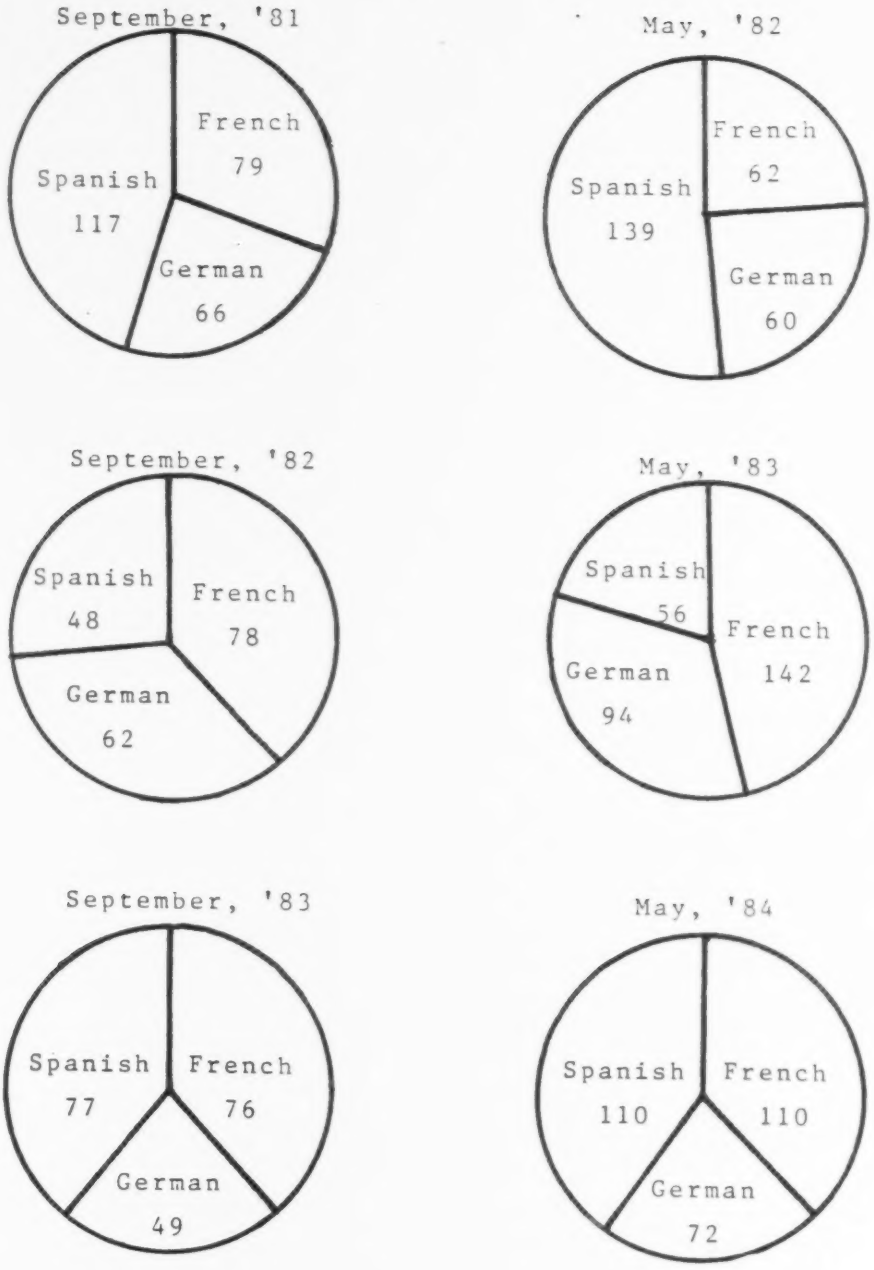
In order to perceive more clearly the effects of the FLEX course, the two questionnaires from the same individuals were paired together and analyzed. From the 870 matched questionnaires six groups emerged.

Group 1 -- Students who remained loyal to their particular language choices between September and May.

Group 2 -- Students who switched their particular language choices between September and May.

Group 3 -- Students who elected to study a language in September, but only decided on a particular language by May.

GRAPH 1



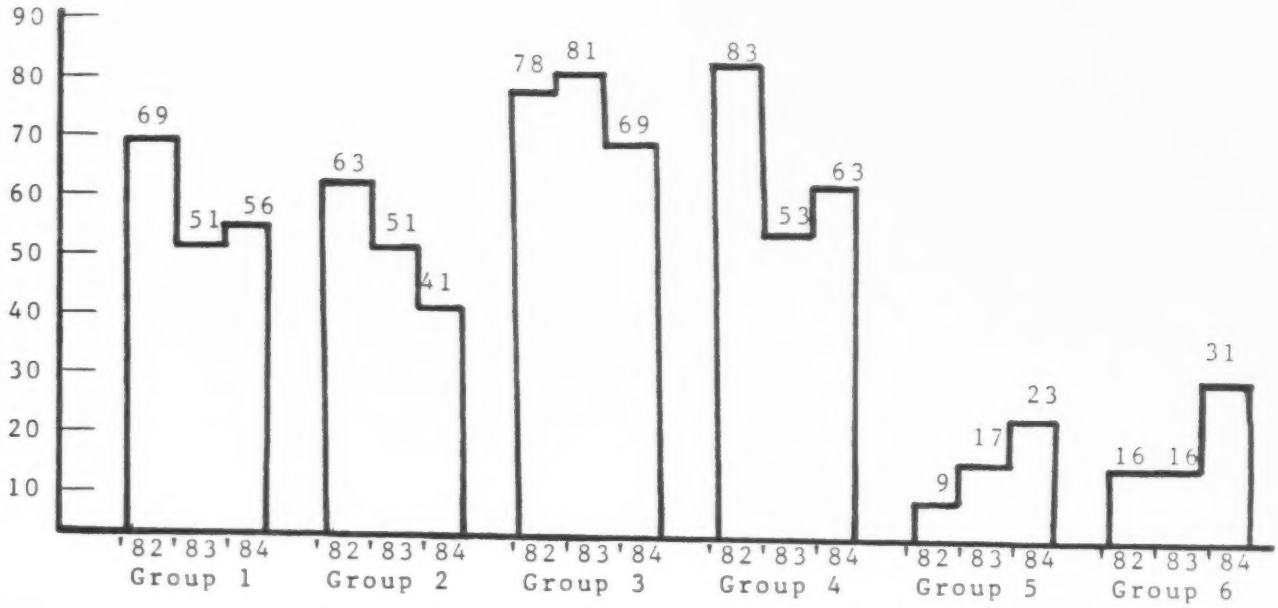
Group 4 -- Students who elected to study a language in September, but decided not to study one by May.

Group 5 -- Students who elected not to study a language in September, but decided to study one by May.

Group 6 -- Students who remained loyal to their decisions not to study a language between September and May.

The number of students in each group per year is indicated on GRAPH 2.

GRAPH 2 # in Groups of Matched Questionnaires



In order to determine if the experiences in the course affected the students making decisions between September and May, Groups 2, 3, 4 and 5 were examined. One factor was the number of students in each Group 2 to 5, who on the May questionnaire attributed their decisions to the FLEX course. Chi-square tests of significance were applied under the assumption that, if at least one out of two students checked one or more of the FLEX course reasons for their decisions, then a significant effect would be in evidence. At the .05 level of significance with 1 degree of freedom, significant levels of response were found for Groups 2 and 3 each year and for Group 5 during the first two years of the study. No significant level of response was found for Group 4 in any of the three years.

Apparently FLEX course experiences did affect students who: 1) changed their minds regarding which language to study, 2) decided which language to study, and 3) decided to choose to study a language. In fact, as many as three out of four students checked FLEX reasons in each of these groups during the first year. And FLEX course experiences did not affect students who decided not to choose to study a language.

Caution, however, must be exercised in drawing final conclusions from these data. For instance, the number of students in Group 5 who decided to choose to study a language by the end of the course was relatively small, even though it increased each year. The value of the course in terms of so few students is questionable.

Nevertheless, the insignificant effect of FLEX on students deciding not to choose to study a foreign language is further substantiated by the fact that an extraordinarily large number of students from this group responded each year with either "NO PARTICULAR REASON" for their decisions or "OTHER". In 1982 twenty-four of the 83 students checked "NO PARTICULAR REASON", in 1983 fifteen of 53 and in 1984 seventeen of 63. In other groups this response was never indicated by more than five students. The "OTHER" category was checked by 42 students in 1982, more than half of the respondents in Group 4 that year. The predominant reason given was that they were advised by their guidance counselors not to take a foreign language, because their grades in English were below 80. In 1983 and 1984 this reason completely disappeared, because criteria were subsequently established that stressed the student's FLEX course grades and the individual recommendations of the FLEX teachers. Still thirteen students in 1983 and twenty-one in 1984 marked the "OTHER" category. Now, however, the predominant reasons were "I plan to take one in tenth grade," and "I chose another elective."

Among the reasons for taking a foreign language and for not taking one which appeared on both questionnaires, excluding "NO PARTICULAR REASON" and the FLEX course reasons, comparable data were collected each year for Groups 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6. In groups 1, 2, 5 & 6 the mean frequency of response was significantly greater every year on the May questionnaire. These data indicate that at the completion of the course, students had more reasons for making their final decisions than they had at the beginning of the course. Even the students who did not change their minds between September and May had more reasons for maintaining their initial choices. Group 1, in fact, recorded the highest combined mean frequency of response of any group in May - 6.2, suggesting that these students were more firmly committed to their decisions.

The most frequent responses on all the May questionnaires listed by the students electing a language were: 1) I like it, 2) it's

interesting, and 3) I think I can do well. The least frequent responses by these same students were: 1) I know the teachers at high school who teach it, 2) NO PARTICULAR REASON, 3) I'll have to study it after high school, and 4) I like the peoples who speak it.

Among the students choosing not to study a language the most frequent reasons given for their decisions in May were: 1) OTHER, 2) NO PARTICULAR REASON, 3) I don't think I could do well, and 4) of poor grades in this FLEX course. The least frequent responses listed by these students were: 1) they are hard, 2) of my experiences with them in this FLEX course, 3) I don't like them, and 4) I won't need it.

From these results it can be inferred that at the end of the course students made their decisions concerning future foreign language study on a firm, informed basis. Although many did not primarily attribute their decisions directly to the FLEX course, reasons such as "I think (don't think) I could do well", which ranked third most frequent among responses in May, indicate a reflective appraisal by the students of their own abilities. Poor grades in FLEX became increasingly significant during the second and third years of the program as a deterrent to continued language study.

Indeed, the FLEX course was not even perceived by the students electing not to study a foreign language as a negative experience, for it was the second least frequent reason listed for their decisions. These students also did not feel that foreign languages were hard, since this reason was their least frequent response.

Conversely, relatively few students who selected a language in May considered them easy. The comparative percentages of students selecting each language, who listed "it's easy" as a reason for their choices, are given in TABLE 2. Spanish was perceived as being easy by

TABLE 2 Percent of All Students Listing "it's easy"

	September	May
French	8.6%	33.5%
German	5.4%	34.5%
Spanish	10.0%	27.8%

the largest percentage in September, and whereas German had the smallest percentage in September, by the end of the FLEX course German was perceived as being easy by the largest percentage and Spanish by the smallest percentage. During the course German had shed its stigma of being the most difficult.

As the course began, many staff members felt that students might select the language they study last, since course selection occurred at that time. Also it was believed that the personalities and teaching styles of the three teachers might greatly affect the language choices of the students. Both of these factors were not substantiated by the data collected in this study. No trend toward selection of language according to last language studied was detected. In three of the nine instances, the last language was the one most chosen; in three instances it was neither the most nor the least one chosen; and in the remaining three instances it was the least chosen -- a distribution reflecting random chance.

Students at the three middle schools also realized that they would have a different language teacher at the high school, and among the three FLEX course reasons for selecting a particular language, the reason stating because "of one of my FLEX course teachers" was checked only one-fourth as frequently as the other FLEX course reasons.

In consideration of the data and factors examined in this three-year study, it can be concluded that based on experiences in the course students: 1) changed their minds regarding which language to study, 2) decided which language to study, and 3) chose to study a language. It could not be substantiated that based on experiences in the course students did not choose to study a language.

From the retention rates displayed in TABLE 3, it can be further concluded that since the inclusion of FLEX in the curriculum: 1) the retention rates have significantly increased between French I and II, French II and III, Spanish I and II, and Spanish II and III, and 2) the retention rates have significantly decreased between German II and III, and German III and IV. No significant increase or decrease in retention rates could be found between French III and IV, German I and II, and Spanish III and IV. The combined retention rates of French, German and Spanish indicate: 1) a significant increase between Levels I and II, and Levels II and III, and 2) a significant decrease between Levels III and IV. The reliability of data regarding the retention

TABLE 3 Upper Level Retention Rates

	French		
	I-II	II-III	III-IV
Before FLEX	66.1%	32.4%	54.8%
After FLEX	79.1%	39.6%	54.5%
	German		
	I-II	II-III	III-IV
Before FLEX	70.6%	43.4%	44.2%
After FLEX	68.4%	33.1%	38.1%
	Spanish		
	I-II	II-III	III-IV
Before FLEX	63.4%	16.6%	37.3%
After FLEX	80.4%	47.4%	37.1%
	French, German and Spanish		
	I-II	II-III	III-IV
Before FLEX	65.0%	24.8%	45.8%
After FLEX	76.8%	41.0%	41.9%

rates between Levels III and IV in every case is questionable, however, because of the existence of only one year's figures since the inclusion of FLEX. And any attempt to declare a causal relationship between FLEX and the subsequent increases and decreases in retention rates is futile, because of the many intervening variables that also affect these changes.

The total number of students enrolled in German I, II, III and IV has actually increased by 94.9% since FLEX was introduced, and the number of French students has risen by 17.2%. These increases reflect substantial gains in Level I and Level II enrollments. On the other

hand, the total number of students enrolled in Spanish I, II, III and IV has declined by 23.1% since the introduction of FLEX. This decrease reflects a substantial loss in Level I students.

In summary, the number of students in French, German and Spanish has become increasingly more evenly distributed after the students have been exposed to all three in FLEX. The perennial, predominant number of students enrolled in Spanish I was replaced in 1983 and again in 1984 by French, and then in 1985 German enrolled the most Level I students. Also the combined total number of students in French, German and Spanish has increased each year since the incorporation of FLEX in the eighth grade curriculum. This gradual increase has resulted in a 5.6% rise in the French, German and Spanish enrollment since 1982. Although the study of Latin has been revived and strenthened in the district, Latin must receive more exposure in FLEX and be taught by a certified instructor, if it is to gain a more equitable number of students.

In its first three years in the middle schools of the Williamsport Area School District, the FLEX program has significantly affected many of the students' choices regarding foreign language study and has resulted in a more balanced distribution of students enrolled in French, German and Spanish. Since its introduction into the curriculum in 1981, foreign language enrollments have also increased and retention rates in upper level courses have improved in more cases than they have declined.

In order to increase the effectiveness of the course, constant revisions and improvements of the curriculum need to be implemented and maintained. The establishment of a detailed and comprehensive curriculum will facilitate the entry of new teachers into the program and will enhance the accomplishment of the course goals.

Action should be considered in regard to the placement of FLEX in the seventh grade and the installation of Level I in the eighth grad . Most teachers in the department opposed the inclusion of the FLEX program in the eighth grade, because it replaced an already existent introductory course in French, German or Spanish. The staff, in general, still perceives eighth grade FLEX as a retardant to rather than as a stimulus for language proficiency.

The assignment of teachers to the FLEX program should also be rotated each year among the members of the department. Although most

students rated FLEX as one of their favorite eighth grade classes, (see Appendix "D") it can easily become very tedious and demanding for the instructor, who teaches the same material six or seven periods per day three times per year.

Copies of this three-year study have been submitted to the administrative officials and foreign language instructors of the Williamsport Area School District, to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and to foreign language and curriculum specialists in several states.

This study will be expanded during the 1986-87 school year to include an analysis of FLEX programs in numerous schools in the Northeastern United States. Similar school districts without FLEX programs will also be surveyed and compared. The findings of this future study will be published in the summer of 1987.

NAME: _____ DATE: _____ SCHOOL: _____

Directions: Please read and complete some of the statements below! When finished, fold and staple this sheet! Your teacher will not see your responses!

Place an "X": ____ YES ____ NO 1. At high school next year I want to study a foreign language.
If you marked "YES", respond to statement 2!
If you marked "NO", respond only to statement 5!

Place an "X": ____ YES ____ NO 2. I have already decided which language I want.
If you marked "YES", please continue on to statements 3 & 4!
If you marked "NO", stop here!

Place an "X": 3. I want to study:
____ French I.
____ German I.
____ Spanish I.

Place one or more "X's": 4. I want this language because:

____ I like it.
____ my friends are taking it.
____ it's easy.
____ my brothers, sisters, parents or other relatives studied it in school.
____ I already know some.
____ my relatives know some.
____ my family's background is linked to it.
____ I know the teachers at high school who teach it.
____ I've heard the teachers at high school who teach it are good teachers.
____ I want to visit the countries where it is spoken.
____ I'll need to use it for my future career.
____ I'll have to study it after high school.
____ it's interesting.
____ I think I can do well in it.
____ I like the countries where it is spoken.
____ I like the peoples who speak it.
____ NO PARTICULAR REASON
____ OTHER: _____

Place one or more "X's": 5. I do not want to study a foreign language because:

____ I don't like them.
____ I don't think I could do well.
____ they are hard.
____ I won't need it.
____ NO PARTICULAR REASON
____ OTHER: _____

Merci! Danke! Gracias!

NAME: _____ DATE: _____ SCHOOL: _____

Directions: Please read and complete some of the statements below! When finished, fold and staple this sheet! Your teacher will not see your responses!

Place an "X": ____ YES ____ NO 1. At high school next year I will study a foreign language.

If you marked "YES" please respond to statements 2 & 3!
If you marked "NO" respond only to statement 4!

Place an "X": 2. I will study:
____ French I.
____ German I.
____ Spanish I.

Place one or more "X's": 3. I will study this language because:

____ I like it.
____ my friends are taking it.
____ it's easy.
____ my brothers, sisters, parents or other relatives studied it in school.
____ of learning it in this FLEX course.
____ my relatives know some.
____ my family's background is linked to it.
____ I know the teachers at high school who teach it.
____ I've heard the teachers at high school who teach it are good teachers.
____ of my experiences with it in this FLEX course.
____ I want to visit the countries where it is spoken.
____ I'll need to use it for my future career.
____ I'll have to study it after high school.
____ I think I can do well in it.
____ it's interesting.
____ of one of my FLEX course teachers.
____ I like the countries where it is spoken.
____ I like the peoples who speak it.
____ NO PARTICULAR REASON
____ OTHER: _____

Place one or more "X's": 4. I will not study a foreign language because:

____ I don't like them.
____ they are hard.
____ of poor grades in this FLEX course.
____ I don't think I could do well.
____ of my experiences with them in this FLEX course.
____ I won't need it.
____ NO PARTICULAR REASON
____ OTHER: _____

Merci! Danke! Gracias!

APPENDIX C

FRENCH, GERMAN AND SPANISH ENROLLMENTS
1978 - 1986

	78-79	79-80	80-81	81-82	82-83	83-84	84-85	85-86
French I	117	114	99	80	// 86	172	140	100
German I	50	53	34	40	// 82	112	81	116
Spanish I	223	213	201	220	// 176	82	125	100
TOTAL	390	380	334	340	// 344	373	346	316
French II	105	77	77	61	56	// 57	125	133
German II	27	33	30	26	36	// 59	68	66
Spanish II	151	141	108	121	173	// 134	62	112
TOTAL	283	251	215	208	265	// 250	255	311
French III	33	32	14	24	24	28	// 22	50
German III	20	15	9	17	12	13	// 21	21
Spanish III	35	23	24	14	17	37	// 62	31
TOTAL	88	70	47	55	53	78	// 105	102
French IV	17	20	14	9	13	12	17	// 12
German IV	3	5	4	6	12	3	8	// 8
Spanish IV	19	10	8	6	5	12	15	// 23
TOTAL	39	35	26	21	30	27	40	// 44
French I-IV	272	243	204	174	// 179	269	304	295
Germnan I-IV	100	106	77	89	// 142	194	178	211
Spanish I-IV	428	387	341	361	// 371	265	264	266
TOTAL	800	736	622	624	// 692	728	746	772
Latin I-II	16	14	18	14	// 0	22	45	35

before FLEX // After FLEX

Results of Level I Surveys
# of Student Responses

Last year FLEX was:

	my worst class	one of my worse classes	an average class	one of my favorite classes	my favorite class
Sept. 82	1	1	30	140	68
Sept. 83	1	10	46	87	7

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